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Surroundings / Plan for change

A report on spatial planning, a by-product of the summer's social protests, calls for a radical change in the way Israeli cities are designed. But are calls to action enough?

By Esther Zandberg

A report on spatial planning, a by-product of the summer's social protests, calls for a radical change in the way Israeli cities are designed. But are calls to action enough?

Cosmetics won't help. Israel's open spaces require surgery. Spatial planning is one of the greatest influences on human life. The social protests of the summer were not due to a one-time event, but rather were the culmination of continued failures by generations of Israeli planning bodies.

It is not sufficient to increase the number of available apartments to solve the housing crisis, and not enough to talk only about increasing planning and development budgets; instead, what needs to change is the way budgets are used to reduce gaps between economic classes. Market forces won't do this on their own, and there is not one all-purpose solution; space and land are resources that belong to the general public, not property to be handed over to merchants.

These conclusions and many others are included in the report of an alternative planning team, part of the alternative committee headed by Yossi Yona and Aviva Spivak, and charged with spatial planning, including housing, transportation and land use, that was released in full this week.

The report is the fruit of two months of work by 10 scholars and experts in various disciplines with the participation of protest activists and tent residents.

Facing existing planning that discriminates and deepens social gaps, the committee's planning team attempts to formulate "a different planning policy which places the principles of social justice and strength at the center," in which housing is a right, and the government is involved in leveling the playing field between cities and outlying areas, and between different populations.

The report paints a grim picture of the planning situation in Israel. Its recommendations are an attempt to remedy things from the ground up, before it's too late. The principles upon which they are based are: just and equal division of land resources; planning, development and use to benefit the entire public; diversion of resources to the renewal of existing cities instead of wasteful investment in the creation of new communities and infrastructures, and the granting of different

housing options to different and varied groups of the population according to their needs and character.

The complete report will be presented today at a Hebrew University conference on Mount Scopus, the first of a series of discussions of the report.

Reforms only making things worse

The report, which is meant merely as a springboard, opens with the housing crisis that sparked the protest, saying that the crisis was the result of continued failure by the country's planning bodies. Planning reform and recent laws are only making things worse. The first and symbolic step should be enshrining the right to housing in law. The committee suggested this wording: "Everyone has the right to proper and affordable housing in a space with access to services and infrastructure; everyone has the right to protected tenancy. People should not be evicted from their homes and their homes should not be demolished arbitrarily. Everyone has the right to choose where they live, free of discrimination. Everyone has the right to equal access to housing."

The report places heavy responsibility for the social crisis on Israeli land policy as discriminatory since the state was established, deepening social, class and geographic gaps. It stipulates that social justice is dependent on spatial justice and requires change from the ground up. This includes a move away from discriminatory land-allotment practices; a transition from central planning to democratic planning; and putting an end to privatization of government lands.

The report joins other voices of the last few decades criticizing modern urban planning, warning about the consequences of continued suburbanization and sprawl, and espousing a return to city centers. In an Israel where most cities are themselves suburbs, the report calls for urban renewal and the strengthening of urban cores, density, the creation of mixed-use planning as well as varied housing types within a small area to create a rich and varied urban fabric.

Projects from the Tel Aviv University School of Architecture on urban renewal in Lod, one of the country's poorest cities, offer glimpses into how the report's ideas may look when put into practice.

The report emphasizes that there is no catch-all solution for everybody and calls for cooperation with local residents. The authors of the report recommend an historic correction of continued discrimination in the planning and allotment of lands for Arab towns, and the recognition of Bedouin towns in the Negev.

Recommendations about transportation form a key part of the report, underscoring the close connection between suitable public transportation and social justice. The report calls for new transportation methods as a salve for failed urban planning decisions. Rather than grand government projects for long lines to connect the center of the country to outlying areas, the report sees a vital need for short transportation lines between adjacent cities and within them. Spending daily life on long trips, says transportation planner Becky Shliesberg, one of the report's authors, damages quality of life and the environment.

The Israel Railways does not know how to offer short rides, Schliesberg says. The workhorse of Israeli transportation is the bus, which should be allotted preferred lanes, in order to make it more efficient, accessible and attractive to members of the public who have other alternatives.

Schliesberg also points out that Israel's public transportation system does not in fact operate as a system today, but as separate links with clumsy and ill-planned connections.

"One network that is easy to navigate must be woven together from this collection of services," she said. "The important question is not which means of transportation but which journey we are talking about."

The report is 40 pages long and covers the main problems on the seam between planning, space and social justice. Beyond this, it is an achievement in the diversity of participants and the subjects it examines, each one in light of the other.

One obvious shortcoming is the small amount of attention it devotes to practical planning decisions on the ground. Another plan authored by young architects and which focuses on the physical aspects of social justice, has not been assimilated into the report and so it remains a kind of recommendation hovering in the air.

Existing planning policy must change, but reports and conferences are not enough. There is a need for more extreme steps, if not a real planning intifada. While the report was developed and published and discussed and aroused sharp debate, the government is deciding these days to erect 10 new towns in the Negev in a step that defies logic and opposes all the team's recommendations.

Contribution of the year: Tents

A summary of the last year in architecture is much easier this year than in earlier ones.

In the parade of events and architectural activity, there is only one candidate: the tent protest. This was the most important and significant architectural project, and probably the most influential for years to come.

No other project that was constructed, presented, publicized, or that won a planning competition can equal the tent cities erected all over the country. No project that emerged from planning books and their regulations can use so well the potential of public expanses.

No less than the protest itself, its physical and symbolic architectural expression - the tent - is engraved in the collective consciousness.

The tent cities comprised an urban planning school and offered an education to architects and planners searching in vain for the philosopher's stone of planning that will make our towns and cities better and more just.

Perhaps professional egos will be put in their place. Perhaps the neighborhoods that will be built in the future will begin to suit us better, like the tent cities, and bore us less than they do now.

And the term social justice alone - or even just justice - is an undeniable contribution by the tent cities to the architectural world, and its place is now preserved in the architectural lexicon. It is to be hoped that it will trickle into architectural activity as well.

The dark shadow of the project of the year is the destruction and evacuation of the tents before their time, including the tents of the homeless. The basic instinct to destroy and evict didn't rest a minute this year either.

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